

Isaiah 42:1-7

Acts 10:34-48

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Let's look at the sacraments God gave to the Church. Let's look at what a sacrament is and how we should understand it. (And how we're kidding ourselves when we think we do understand it.)

We talk about baptism today as we celebrate the festival of the Baptism of Our Lord. This is a great opportunity to think about what God has done for us in the gift of baptism.

We have two sacraments: Holy Baptism and The Lord's Supper. We celebrate those two gifts. Notice the places where we celebrate the two sacraments are located in the center of our worship space – the altar and the baptismal font are focal points when we gather as a church.

Two things are needed for a sacrament. One: It must be instituted by Christ to carry the Holy Spirit. Two: It must have a physical element.

The Lord's Supper has the physical element of bread and wine. It was instituted by Christ, of course, in the upper room when he was having the Last Supper with his apostles. And the Lord's Supper does communicate God's Holy Spirit. It is a sacrament. The physical element in baptism is water. Baptism also communicates the Holy Spirit and was instituted by Christ. Some people have questioned this; they ask how baptism could have been started by Christ if John was already doing it when Christ came along? ...As John himself says in this morning's Gospel lesson, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." That is Christian Baptism. Baptism with the Holy Spirit. And that baptism is instituted by Jesus Christ.

A sacrament has two parts. It is physical and it carries the grace of God. That is the very nature of Christ himself. Christ is God. He carries the Holy Spirit. To come to us, Christ became a physical person. The Holy Spirit - communicated to us in a physical form. Christ is the perfect sacrament.

That connection is important. Think of the sacraments as being like Jesus himself. God coming to us in physical form.

As water; as bread and wine; as a man.

God comes to us in many ways – more than the sacraments. He comes to us everyday through other people. God comes to us in reading the scriptures. He communicates to us as we pray. He comes as we put his word and our lives together - that is the sermon. But it is the sacraments where God comes to us more distinctly and more purely than any other time. The interpretation of the Bible, the concerns we pray about, the attempt to live our lives according to

the sermon...these all demand things from us. But the sacraments are pure grace. "A free gift to us" is the way the Bible puts it.

We do not make the sacraments good or bad, the sacrament is straight from God. It is his grace and love coming to us...just like Jesus himself. We do not make Jesus good or bad. Jesus is God.

Baptism is pure grace. That is our understanding of a sacrament. Many people do not share that understanding of baptism. It is important to realize that, because as you have conversation with your friends who do not have that understanding of a sacrament there may be some confusion. Many people think that baptism is not effective unless the person being baptized can demonstrate a readiness to be baptized. In this way of thinking - baptism is not something that God does without the understanding of the person. They don't baptize babies because they ask why we should baptize little babies who cannot understand a relationship with God. It isn't meaningful to the baby. This is a very common way to look at baptism and if you haven't heard of it I'd be surprised. Many denominations take that approach, and teach that baptism is not important unless the one being baptized knows what's going on.

We should make a distinction here to understand the difference. We call what we do baptism and they call what they do baptism, so for the sake of clearing this up, let's use two different terms. What we call baptism is a "sacrament". What they call baptism is "public confession of faith".

Public confession of faith is good and it is important. But it is not a sacrament. Public confession depends on the person involved. The person must understand himself and his relationship with God. He must be able to make a mature rational decision before he can confess that he has that relationship with God.

But a sacrament does not depend on us. A sacrament is an act of God. So, if a baby doesn't understand - that's not what we are doing anyway. God is the one who understands. And God can communicate with a baby as well as he can with anyone else.

Public confession of faith is important. As a matter of fact we make a big deal out of it here in the Lutheran Church. We call it confirmation or, more correctly, Affirmation of Baptism. It is not our practice for a person to make a decision, step to the front of the church, and make such a commitment. We want you to think about this. After a person has been chosen by Christ in the Sacrament of Baptism that person begins a life of living for Christ. That includes instruction and coming to an understanding of his relationship with God. Before a person affirms his baptism he does need to think about what he is doing, of course. That's why we have classes for adults. That's why we have young people come to extra classes and study the Bible and talk about life and what they want to do and where they are going. They have to prepare themselves for a life to be lived with God before they can affirm the choice that God has already made. They must be responsible before they can be confirmed.

Finally, on confirmation day, they say to God, "You chose me in Baptism. Now I choose you. I affirm what you did when you baptized me."

That is public confession of faith and we know its importance.

There is also the circumstance of adult baptism which combines both sacrament and public confession. The gift of grace and the public proclamation that the person will live according to God's grace. Never let it be said that we do not take public commitment seriously. It is emphasized strongly in this church.

Sacraments are primary. They come first. Just like Jesus himself. If Christ had not come to the world on his own, undeserved and uninvited, if he hadn't come of his own accord, we certainly wouldn't be Christians. No matter how good we are or what decisions we have reached. Christ had to take the initiative. God had to come to us.

So with the sacraments. They come first. Because of the grace that comes to us through the sacraments, all else follows. Because he chooses us, we want to do his will. We

study the Bible, we listen to sermons, we give financially, we pray for God's will in our lives. We do all this because he first chose us. The grace of baptism comes first in our lives.

If we haven't chosen him yet, that is the way it has always been with Christ. Just as Christ came on his own to the world that was really not ready for him and certainly didn't understand him. Baptism recreates that coming in each individual's life. Jesus comes to the baptized person who is really not ready for him and certainly doesn't understand him.

We live in the grace of God and it changes our lives. We vow that we will live for God. Parents and sponsors make that vow for infants. Older people make the vow for themselves.

Baptism is God's choice for us. Christ came to the world and he came to you. Everything you do - do it because you are baptized. Do it because of the grace of God which came into your life uninvited and unearned.

Remind yourself that you are baptized. You have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Make the sign of the cross from time to time to remind yourself of who you are: a baptized saint, chosen by God. That's why we make the sign of the cross at the beginning of the worship service - and I encourage you to make that sign.

In part seven of Luther's catechism, the section on morning and evening prayers, the very first words are "In the morning when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, 'In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.'"

Remind yourself of the basis of your relationship with God. You are chosen by God. You are baptized. Affirm your baptism everyday. Remind yourself. That is your strength - your anchor.

The great thing about your relationship with God is not anything that you could have done for yourself. It is not your piety, your goodness, your decision, your knowledge, your good reputation, your education, or your family. All of those things can show you that you have chosen God.

But your strength is...God has chosen you.

Our ability to choose God is not always perfect. It comes and goes. We fall; we turn from God; we sin. But you have been marked with the cross of Christ. You are God's.

On this day of the Baptism of our Lord, we remember that God came to choose us. He came as Jesus Christ to live our lives with us. Joining with us in the water of baptism. Living with us in the world. Keeping us in eternity.